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SUBJECT: GROWING TIES IN AUSTRALIAN-U.S. WATER COLLABORATION

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Summary

1. Australia and the United States face many similar challenges in managing drought and bringing water to growing urban populations. Federal, state-to-state and commercial ties already exist between the two countries, but as Australia braces for another year of dry conditions, opportunities abound for deeper collaboration on water. South Australia in particular, hit hard by the drought, has instituted a number of collaborative efforts with U.S. entities, and is seeking additional cooperation on water. End Summary.

Another Year of Drought in South Australia

2. South Australia is facing unprecedented water shortages in 2010. An ongoing drought in the Murray-Darling Basin -- which supplies water to the states of New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia -- has been complicated by higher water salinity and the presence of dangerous algae. During a November 9 visit to Adelaide, a panel of experts told Charge that the water in two major freshwater lakes south of Adelaide has reached such a dangerously low level that agencies are considering allowing salt water to flow into the lakes from the ocean in order to fight off a rise in acid sulfate levels caused by the exposure of previously submerged sediments. This would be politically unpopular, but water experts are concerned about the lakes reaching a point of no return.

3. The South Australian government has taken numerous steps to improve dwindling water supplies. It has already experimented with stringent demand-management practices, but recognizes that changed behaviors alone will not solve the problem. A desalination plant near Adelaide, likely to come online in late 2010 to early 2011, will help provide drinking water, but will not solve challenges arising out of the Murray-Darling River's deterioration. In addition to the desalination plant, South Australia is attempting to diversify its water supplies by exploring storm water harvesting and new river treatment techniques. Lower river levels have compelled South Australia's water managers to move water pumps deeper underground. The state has also installed a series of salt interception plants to deal with rising salinity levels in the Murray-Darling.

4. A brouhaha between the states of South Australia, New South Wales and Victoria over riparian rights was recently solved by the Commonwealth (federal) government assuming control of the Murray-Darling River Basin (reftels). A member of this board participated in the November 9 panel, saying that it is still early days for the new agency and real changes will not begin to occur until the board delivers its "basin plan" in 2011. She did note, however, that Australia's federal government is becoming more interested in river management and will likely become a significant

water owner in time.

Australia-U.S. Water Ties

15. South Australia's city of Salisbury has developed an innovative storm water harvesting program which entails cleaning the storm water by inserting it into wetlands and then injecting it into brackish aquifers where it displaces higher salinity water. The "grade two" water is later extracted and principally used for irrigation. Both procedures entitle the city to additional water permits which they then trade to other municipalities. The city of Salisbury has already shared this procedure with the city of Phoenix, Orange County, California and a city in Florida and is open to further cooperation.

16. Another panel participant informed us that Native Americans on Oregon's Columbia River meet regularly with several of South Australia's indigenous tribes to discuss water management. In addition, the University of California-Riverside is co-hosting a five continent conference with Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in California in March 2010 and then in Australia in September 2010. A delegation of California state and industry water officials is currently traveling in Australia examining drought response and agricultural practices. Former U.S. EPA Administrator Steve Johnson visited Australia in April 2008 and signed a broad letter of agreement to institutionalize cooperation on water with Australian Minister for Climate Change and Water, Penny Wong. A series of digital video conference discussions since 2007 has featured EPA water experts presenting U.S. best practices on the safety and effectiveness of

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water reuse and adaptation to climate change-induced drought. In 2009, CSIRO joined the DVC series to better integrate joint scientific work with the EPA and USG scientists.

Comment

17. Australia is the driest inhabited continent on earth and almost all climate projections going forward show that this will not change. Strong population growth in Australia will also put greater stress on available water supplies. All signs point to water management becoming an increasingly important task for Australian governments upon which they will be judged by voters. While strong collaboration already exists between the United States and Australia on water management, deeper ties will serve both countries well as U.S. communities grapple with similar water challenges.

THURSTON